

Report by Kristian Vigenin, OSCE PA Special Representative on the South Caucasus
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It was an honour for me to be appointed by President Ilkka Kanerva as Special Representative on the South Caucasus in February. The importance of this region for the OSCE and the wider world is obvious not only from the security challenges it presents, but also the opportunities. We were reminded of the significant security challenges in a devastating manner in early April by the sharp increase in clashes in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict zone. To see the opportunities, we need only look around our surroundings for this Annual Session in Tbilisi at the impressive work our Georgian hosts have done in bringing us all together here.

Since being appointed earlier this year, I have visited all three OSCE countries in the region: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. In my meetings, including with all three Presidents, Speakers and Deputy Speakers of Parliaments, leading parliamentarians and high-level officials, I was impressed by their commitment to the OSCE. The recognition that the OSCE and our Parliamentary Assembly are appropriate and useful forums is a strength that we should take advantage of.

The security challenges and conflicts in this region are very sensitive. The OSCE has an important role here, both regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, but also in the context of the Geneva International Discussions. I have therefore worked to maintain close contact with the relevant representatives and bodies that have a formal role in negotiation processes. In all my communications, I have stressed that my – and our Assembly's – intention is not to engage in negotiations regarding the conflicts. This is the work of Governments. But parliaments can help create an environment conducive to peace, and in this regard I believe there is potential for the OSCE PA to contribute.

In addition, I have taken the opportunity to reach out to and remain in contact with other international actors working in the region. There are a wide range of actors, both within the OSCE but also on behalf of the EU, NATO and other organizations working particularly on security challenges in the South Caucasus. It is my firm belief that more co-ordination is necessary if we in the international community are to have a real and effective impact.

The Nagorno Karabakh conflict

Following the sharp increase in clashes in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict zone in early April, a renewed ceasefire was reached. Clashes have since dropped significantly. In late May, and again in late June, the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met. They reiterated their commitment to the ceasefire and the peaceful settlement of the conflict. To reduce the risk of further violence, they agreed to finalize in the shortest possible time an OSCE investigative mechanism, which could be an important confidence-building measure. The Presidents also agreed to the expansion of the existing Office of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson in Office. The resumption of negotiations on a comprehensive settlement remains a priority aim for the immediate future.

With the improvements in adherence to the ceasefire, and the positive steps agreed to by the Presidents, I believe that this is an opportunity for parliamentarians to contribute.

Trust is sorely lacking between Armenia and Azerbaijan. To help contribute to trust and political will in favour of compromise, it is therefore my intention to work for increased dialogue between Armenian and Azerbaijani parliamentarians. In close co-ordination with the OSCE PA delegations I will be discussing various ideas for increased exchanges and dialogue that can be implemented on a permanent basis. I was pleased to hear that parliamentary colleagues in both countries were welcoming of the idea of organizing more meetings between parliamentarians, such as a joint meeting between the Foreign Affairs committees of the two countries, and I hope to pursue this as an option in coming months.

It is also my intention to explore avenues to counteract the fact that the public information space in the two countries present dramatically different narratives. The media's selective choice of facts and presentation in an adversarial manner serves to entrench animosities and is an active obstacle for peace efforts. Effectively, today it is a challenge to find news in the two countries that does not play into this adversarial narrative. With my colleagues in both countries I hope to find ways to work toward the development of a less adversarial media environment that can help to inform the public of options for peace.

It had been my plan to organize a side event during this OSCE PA Annual Session in Tbilisi focused on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. While this was supported by the leadership of this Assembly, as well as the host Parliament and the two Delegations, it could unfortunately not be organized due to other commitments of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs and the Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office on the conflict, Ambassador Kasprzyk. However, I will continue to insist on stronger co-ordination between the Minsk Group and the OSCE PA and I plan to present new proposals in this respect, including for instance the idea of a special parliamentary meeting in the Minsk Group format.

I stand ready to provide further information on all of these initiatives to all those that may be interested.

Georgia

With the conflicts in Georgia likely to be placed on the OSCE PA's agenda during this Annual Session, I will not address these challenges in great depth. The Geneva International Discussions provide a useful and constructive platform for tackling issues of peace and stability. While the security situation is thankfully quite stable, we must not forget the significant human toll that the conflicts continue to have on the local population.

Thousands remain internally displaced within the country. On my most recent visit to Georgia, I met a man who is physically separated from his family and farmland by razor wire. And just prior to my visit, at the Khurcha-Nabakevi crossing point on the Administrative Boundary Line, armed men crossed from the Abkhaz side of the bridge and carried out a fatal shooting.

With parliamentary elections scheduled for 8 October, this is a sensitive period within Georgia. Following incidents of violence against opposition leaders a few weeks ago during the local by-elections, I called for a thorough and transparent investigation. While it is the government's responsibility to hold those responsible accountable, I also call on all political forces to act with restraint in the coming months so that the October elections can take place in a calm and peaceful environment. It is my hope that the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly will deploy a robust observation mission to these important elections.